

Autobiographical Narrative Essay or Literacy Narrative

ASSIGNMENT:

Write an autobiographical narrative essay that develops a meaningful viewpoint, message or insight about an issue that you have firsthand experience dealing with.

Coming up with a compelling issue to write your essay about – an issue that can sustain a good story and teach your readers something valuable – is the key to this assignment.

To prepare for the assignment, you should read Chapter 6 in your textbook ("Writing an Autobiographical Narrative" - pp. 109 – 124). It will also be helpful to read Chapter 19 ("Composing and Revising Open-Form Prose" - pp. 619 – 639).

As you consider ideas, think about the possibility of writing a "literacy narrative." This is a narrative essay that focuses on an issue related to writing, reading, education and so forth – in other words, language, learning and communication problems. Literacy narratives are especially relevant to writers and writing students.

Your textbook discusses literacy narratives on pages 119 – 122. You will find excellent examples of some literacy narratives on pages 135 – 156 ("Additional Readings for Chapter 6"). The two excerpts from Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye* (posted on the course web site) also deal with the issue of literacy in the writer's life.

If you prefer, you have the option to base your essay on an issue drawn from other areas of your life, including relationships, jobs, your lifestyle or identity. In class, we'll discuss these options, and approaches to generating and evaluating ideas for the essay.

In addition to the readings noted above, we'll discuss two student essays in the textbook, "Masks" (p. 129) and "Berkeley Blues" (p. 620), as well as some student essays posted on the course web site.

Brief Summary of Assignment Objectives – what the instructor wants students to get out of the assignment:

- Exposure to narrative writing, an important feature of many kinds of writing tasks.
- Exposure to applying the concepts of issue and view to an "open-form" essay.
- Exposure to writing based on concrete details, description and dialogue, rather than abstract ideas and exposition (that is, writing that "shows" more than "tells").
- Exposure to writing drawn from firsthand knowledge and experience.
- Exposure to writing in a "conversational" style – in other words, a style that conveys a writer's "voice" and prioritizes communicating with readers.

Brief Summary of Grading Criteria – what your Instructor will be looking for:

- A strong opening that presents the central issue in a real and compelling way, and makes readers want to read on.

- A detailed narrative that is coherent and focused, that takes the reader into the reality of the issue by *re-creating* key events, incidents and conversations (in other words, a narrative that allows the reader to evaluate the writer's experience, decisions and responses).
- A reader-relevant conclusion - i.e., a conclusion that expresses a meaningful view or message, that conveys what the writer learned from dealing with the issue and what readers can learn from the essay. When all is said and done, the essay needs to answer the "so what?" question.
- A reader-friendly essay that is well-edited – each sentence can be understood the first time it is read; the narrative (or "story") is easy to follow; the paragraphing is effective; the transitions are clear. There are few, if any, mechanical errors that distract the reader and interfere with the "flow" of the essay.

Class discussions and workshops will cover effective ideas for the essay, as well as approaches to planning, organizing and drafting. We'll also discuss how to avoid subjectivity and maximize the essay's potential to interest and enlighten readers.

Finally, here are a few questions you should ask yourself before you begin composing the essay:

Are you still in the process of dealing with the issue that you plan to write about?

If so, even if the issue is compelling and relevant, you may not have enough perspective on it to develop a meaningful viewpoint or message. Generally speaking, it will be easier for you to base your essay on an issue from your past that you have a perspective on – in other words, that you can look back on and see an outcome, resolution or some kind of "closure."

Are you comfortable writing about the issue?

A meaningful essay has to be "real," detailed and honest. It can't be vague or generalized. If you feel uncomfortable expressing yourself honestly about an issue and sharing the facts with readers, you should choose a different issue to write about.

Is the issue really *your* issue – one that you have dealt with firsthand – not someone else's?

To complete the assignment successfully, the essay must develop an issue that you experienced and dealt with firsthand, not an issue that you observed someone else dealing with. In other words, the essay needs to be about you (but for your readers).

If you focus the essay on someone else's issue – for example, a sibling's drug problem – chances are that you will end up writing more of a report than an essay. However, you always can choose to base your essay on the effect that someone else's issue had on you: how, for example, a sibling's drug problem was an issue for you – in other words, how it affected your life. In that case, the essay would really be about you and you would have the intimate knowledge of the issue that is necessary for developing a reader-relevant message.